

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

ACDA-07 OMB-01 /078 W

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R 181059Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0000

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 4666

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, SY

SUBJECT: SHIHABI CUT OUT OF DECISION MAKING ON LEBANON

1. WELL INFORMED PRIVATE SYRIAN BUSINESSMAN TOLD US JULY 17 THAT CHIEF OF STAFF HIKMAT SHIHABI HAS BEEN CUT OUT OF THE INNER CIRCLE OF ADVISORS TO ASAD ON ANY POLICY QUESTION GOVERNING SYRIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN LEBANON. THIS HAPPENED LAST MAY WHEN HE OPPOSED THE PRESIDENT'S DESIRE TO SEND A MAJOR FORCE INTO LEBANON. TODAY, ACCORDING TO SOURCE, SHIHABI CONTINUES TO FUNCTION AS CHIEF OF STAFF FAITHFULLY EXECUTING ORDERS. BUT ON ANY BASIC MILITARY DECISION AFFECTING LEBANON, ASAD CONTACTS DIRECTLY THE TWO SENIOR COLONELS WHO HAVE SERVED AS MEDIATORS IN BEIRUT ON THE JOINT HIGHER MILITARY COMMITTEE, ALI AL-MADANI AND MOHAMMAD AL-KHOULI. (AL MADANI IS SYRIAN CHIEF OF MILITARY POLICE AND AL-KHOULI IS CHIEF OF AIR FORCE INTELLIGENCE.)

2. ACCORDING TO SOURCE, ASAD CONTINUES TO RESPECT SHIHABI'S PERSONAL ACUITY. HIS FALL FROM FAVOR RESULTED ONLY FROM ASAD'S IRRITATION AT BEING CHALLENGED ON THIS PARTICULAR ISSUE. ASAD KNOWS AS WELL AS ANYONE ELSE
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THAT MADANI AND KHOULI TOGETHER MIGHT EQUAL SHIHABI IN C

CAPABILITY BUT THE PRESIDENT WOULD BROOK NO CRITICISM OF HIS DESIRE TO COMMIT MAJOR ELEMENTS OF HIS ARMY INTO THE LEBANESE CONFLICT.

3. SOURCE COMMENTED THAT SHIHABI'S TROUBLES WITH ASAD ILLUSTRATED AN UNUSUAL PRESIDENTIAL LAPSE INTO IRRITABILITY WHICH SOURCE HOPED PRESIDENT WULD OVERCOME. SOURCE DESCRIBED SHIHABI AS A MAN OF NO PERSONAL AMBITION; ASAD IN PROMOTING HIM FROM CHIEF OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE TO CHIEF OF STAFF IN 1974 HAD PICKED AN UNUSUALLY ABLE AND COMPLETELY LOYAL SERVANT. THE PRESIDENT, SOURCE MUSED, IS SUFFERING FROM A LACK OF COMPETENT MEN IN HIS INNER CIRCLE IN WHOM HE HAS CONFIDENCE.

4. SOURCE CONTINUED THAT ONE OF ASAD'S MOST SERIOUS MISTAKES HAD BEEN HIS FAILURE TO DEVELOP A POTENTIAL SUCCESSOR; THERE WAS NO CROWN PRINCE IN SYRIA TODAY. SOURCE HAD TAXED THE PRESIDENT ABOUT THIS WHEN HE LAST MET WITH HIM IN MAY OF THIS YEAR. ASAD REPORTEDLY REPLIED THAT HE HAD ASKED SOME OF THE "GOOD ELEMENTS" TO COME BACK TO THEIR COUNTRY AND WORK WITH HIM BUT THEY HAD REFUSED. SOURCE SAID THAT ASAD WAS REFERRING AMONG OTHERS TO IZZAT TALABULSI, NOW IN PARIS AS AN EXECUTIVE OF THE BANQUE NATIONALE DE PARIS," WHO HAD BEEN SYRIA'S FIRST CENTRAL BANK GOVERNOR AND LATER MINISTER OF ECONOMY. ASAD HAD VERY MUCH WANTED TALABULSI AS HIS PRIME MINISTER BUT LATTER HAD BEGGED OFF.

5. COMMENT:

WE HEARD REPORTS DURING MAY AND JUNE THAT SHIHABI HAD BEEN UNDER HOUSE ARREST. (A REPORT ALSO CIRCULATED AT THAT TIME THAT DEFENSE MINISTER MUSTAFYUTLAS WAS SIMILARLY RESTRICTED.) IF ANY SUCH MEASURE WAS TAKEN AGAINST EITHER OFFICER, IT WAS VERY SHORT LIVED. SHIHABI HAS APPEARED ON SYRIAN TELEVISION ATTENDING VARIOUS MEETINGS WITH ASAD AND LEBANESE VISITORS AND AS RECENTLY AS JULY 16 WAS PHOTOGRAPHED ACCOMPANYING THE SAUDI CHIEF OF STAFF ON A CALL ON THE PRESIDENT. (MY MOST RECENT MEETINGS WITH SHIHABA WERE IN MID-JUNE, ONLY SOME TWO WEEKS AFTER HIS ALLEGED FALL FROM GRACE. BOTH MEETING TOOK PLACE AT HIS HOUSE BUT HE

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WAS IN UNIFORM AND HE HAD ONLY THE USUAL NUMBER OF GUARDS AT THE ENTRANCE.)

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL SITUATION, POLITICAL LEADERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 18 JUL 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: KelleyW0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976DAMASC04666
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760276-0916
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760746/aaaabooq.tel
Line Count: 110
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: KelleyW0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 APR 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 APR 2004 by CunninFX>; APPROVED <19 AUG 2004 by KelleyW0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SHIHABI CUT OUT OF DECISION MAKING ON LEBANON
TAGS: PINS, SY, (SHIHABI, HIKMAT)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006